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Side-bet theory and the three-component model of organizational commitment[☆]

Deborah M. Powell* and John P. Meyer*

Department of Psychology, University of Western Ontario, London, Ont., Canada N6A 5C2

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Abstract

We tested Becker's (1960) side-bet conceptualization of commitment within the context of Meyer and Allen's (1991) three-component model of organizational commitment. Employees ($N = 202$) from various organizations completed a survey including measures of (a) seven categories of side bets (b) affective, normative, and continuance commitment, and (c) turnover intention. The findings provided strong support for Becker's theory. All seven side-bet categories correlated significantly with a revised measure of high-sacrifice continuance commitment, and structural equation modeling analyses revealed that the relations between the side bets and turnover intention were fully mediated by commitment. The findings also address issues pertaining to the dimensionality and measurement of continuance commitment, and help to explain relations among the three components of commitment.

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1. Introduction

It has been more than 40 years since Howard Becker (1960) introduced his side-bet theory of commitment. Although generally not considered a stand-alone theory

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* Corresponding authors. Fax: +519-661-3961.

E-mail addresses: dpowell@uwo.ca (D.M. Powell), meyer@uwo.ca (J.P. Meyer).

of organizational commitment today, it continues to be influential as a result of its incorporation into popular multi-dimensional models of organizational commitment, including Meyer and Allen's (1991, 1997) three-component model. Becker described commitment as a tendency to engage in "consistent lines of activity" (p. 33), and argued that it develops as a "person finds that his involvement in social organization has, in effect, made side bets for him and thus constrained his future" (p. 36). Meyer and Allen (1991) referred to this form of commitment as *continuance* (cost-based) commitment, and included it along with *affective* (desire-based) and *normative* (obligation-based) commitment in their three-component model.

Becker's (1960) side-bet theory has been tested on numerous occasions with mixed results (e.g., Alluto, Hrebiniak, & Alonso, 1973; Hrebiniak & Alutto, 1972; Ritzer & Trice, 1969). Unfortunately, the research has been plagued with methodological problems (Cohen & Lowenberg, 1990; Meyer & Allen, 1984; Shore, Tetrick, Shore, & Barksdale, 2000), so that, after 40 years, questions about its validity remain. Although the measure of continuance commitment developed by Meyer and Allen (1984; Allen & Meyer, 1990) to test their three-component model has been found to correlate with variables akin to side bets (see Allen & Meyer, 1996; Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2002), research to date has been limited. Moreover, there is some question about whether this measure accurately reflects commitment as conceptualized by Becker (Ko, Price, & Mueller, 1997; McGee & Ford, 1987).

The present study addressed the methodological problems in earlier studies and provides a more adequate test of Becker's (1960) side-bet theory within the context of Meyer and Allen's (1991) three-component model. The findings have implications for both side-bet theory and the three-component model. The two are described briefly below. We then review previous research, with an emphasis on methodological limitations. Finally, we provide a more detailed discussion of our objectives, and state our hypotheses.

2. Becker's side-bet theory

Becker (1960) proposed that: "commitments come into being when a person, by making a side bet, links extraneous interests with a consistent line of activity" (p. 32). Thus, the effect of making side bets is to increase the cost of failing to persist in a course of action. In the case of organizational commitment, the course of action is staying with the company. Side bets can take various forms, but Becker suggested that they fall into several broad categories: generalized cultural expectations about responsible behavior, self-presentation concerns, impersonal bureaucratic arrangements, individual adjustments to social positions, and non-work concerns.

Generalized cultural expectations refer to the expectations of important reference groups regarding what constitutes responsible behavior (e.g., how long one should stay at a job). Violating these expectations could lead to real, or imagined, negative consequences. *Self-presentation concerns* arise when a person attempts to present a consistent public image that requires behaving in a particular fashion. Failure to

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